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ABSTRACT

Within the South African tertiary education context, information management is taught from a variety of perspectives, including computer science, business management, informatics, and library and information science. Each discipline has a particular multidisciplinary focus dealing with its fundamentals. To investigate information management education at the tertiary level, qualitative research consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted in 1995 among the total population of academics teaching information management at South African universities. Based on this research, the existence of each multidisciplinary perspective can be argued. However, viewing the study domain from a wider interdisciplinary perspective, it can be argued that the core focus is information, secondly the management of information, and thirdly the application of technology (as a tool) for its enhancement. For this reason, the coexistence of multi-, inter-, and transdisciplinary approaches to information management education is proposed (based on local and international trends), within a broader school of library and information science/studies. It is concluded that the horizontal integration of information management education into information skills curricula at the primary and secondary levels and an inter- and/or transdisciplinary approach at the tertiary level is the most appropriate means of providing the essential life coping skills that modern individuals require to function effectively in society. (Contains 16 references.) (MES)

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Striving for balance: the co-existence of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary curricula in information management education to address information imbalances on tertiary level

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Abstract

Within the South African context, the lack of awareness of information is exacerbated by the existence of two segments of society: a hi-tech literate segment, and a predominantly oral and largely illiterate segment. Those people which form the illiterate segment, also referred to, as the 'information poor/have-nots' are mainly within the agrarian and industrial spheres, and in general, are also information illiterate. People which form part of the first world segment of the economy, also referred to as the 'information rich/have's', are usually information literate, but not necessarily computer literate or effective managers of personal or company information. From a holistic perspective this information gap implies that many people do not have the necessary skills to access or manage information and need to rely on trained (library and) information managers/librarians to assist them. This implies the necessity of appropriate broad based education in information management.

Within the Southern African tertiary education context, information management is tutored from a variety of perspectives, ranging from Computer Science, Business Management, Informatics and Library and Information Science. Each discipline has its particular multidisciplinary focus dealing with the fundamentals particular to each discipline. After in-depth qualitative research into the field the existence of each multidisciplinary perspective

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can be argued. However, viewing the study domain from a wider interdisciplinary perspective, it can be argued that the core foci is information, secondly the management thereof, and thirdly the application of technology (as a tool) for its enhancement. For this reason, the co-existence of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to information management education is proposed (based on local and international trends), within a broader "school" of (library and) information science/studies.

Today the dichotomy is that although the information age necessitates an integrated world order, most educational institutions are still following the industrial age paradigm of specialisation, producing students that are not able to operate effectively in the real world. Thus especially in the current climate of university rationalisation, it is imperative that an integrated approach be investigated from the broadest perspective in order to avoid pre-emptive fragmentation and overspecialisation among a multitude of disciplines. In conclusion it can be stated that the information age has led to a complex social and institutional structure in modern society. For global citizens to operate successfully within this society they need to be aware of information as well as accessing and managing it for the purposes of basic survival, let alone decision making and problem solving. Clearly certain information skills are required. The horizontal integration of information management education into information skills curricula at primary and secondary levels and an inter- and/or transdisciplinary approach at tertiary level appears to be the most appropriate means of providing the essential life coping skills which modern individuals require to function effectively in society.

Paper

Striving for balance: the co-existence of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary curricula in information management education to address information imbalances on tertiary level.

The increasing complexity of modern society has had a marked effect on the social and professional lives of people worldwide. A general lack of awareness of the importance and value of information as a life-coping resource is evident amongst both literate and illiterate people. This in turn has resulted, in the now cliched term the "information gap" which exists between the "information rich" and the "information poor" nations of the world (Wilson 1998:24-25). Yet people in both categories still need to be made aware of the potential value of information for problem solving and decision making on all levels, from the level of one's personal home-life, to the strategic level of a globally aligned corporation.

This lack of awareness of information is especially evident within the South African context and is exacerbated by the existence of the above-mentioned two segments of society: a hi-tech literate segment, and a predominantly oral and largely illiterate segment. Those people which form the illiterate segment, also referred to, as the "information poor/have-nots" are mainly within the agrarian and industrial spheres, and in general, are also information illiterate. People which form part of the first world segment of the economy, also referred to as the "information rich/have's", are usually information literate, but not necessarily computer literate or effective managers of personal or company information. From a holistic perspective this information gap implies that many people still do not possess the necessary skills to access or manage information and need to rely on trained (library and) information managers/librarians to assist them, which in turn implies the necessity of appropriate broad based education in information management on all levels of education, and in this case tertiary level education is addressed.

According to the literature, information management has, since its inception in the early 1980's, as a subject field offered by leading Business Schools, been taught by various disciplines from different perspectives (Correia & Wilson 1992; Ettinger 1991; Evans &

Treloar 1994; Laribee 1992; Pejova 1996). In South Africa, at tertiary level, it is also apparent that information management is tutored from a multidisciplinary perspective with each university specialising in a certain area of information management. Therefore, students become experts in specialised areas, and therefore do not receive a holistic approach to information or the management thereof. Fields of study teaching information management range from Computer Science, Business Management, Informatics and Library and Information Science with each having their particular multidisciplinary focus dealing with fundamentals particular to that discipline (Pemberton & Nugent 1995:126-128). In other words, the current trend in information education is multidisciplinary specialisation, which is largely manifested in the empirical work that investigated information management education at tertiary level.

Depending on one's perspective, however, and viewing the study domain of information management from a wider interdisciplinary perspective, it can be argued that the core foci is information, secondly the management thereof, and thirdly the application of technology (as a tool) for its enhancement. Although the movement today is towards a fair mixture of the three fields, resulting in the so-called "hybrid" information manager, that is au fait with information, management and technology, and their underlying relationships.

To investigate information management education at tertiary level, qualitative research consisting of semi-structured in-depth interviews was conducted amongst the total population of academics tutoring information management at South African universities (Fairer-Wessels 1995). It was found that the status quo of information management education in South Africa is multidisciplinary but fragmented, and that the dichotomy is that although the information age necessitates an integrated world order with information and its related technologies as the primary economic mode (Braman:1998: 134), most educational institutions are still following the industrial age paradigm of specialisation, producing students that are not able to operate effectively in the real world. Thus, especially in the current climate of university rationalisation, it is imperative that an integrated approach be investigated from the broadest perspective in order to avoid pre-emptive fragmentation and overspecialisation among a multitude of disciplines.

More than a decade ago, however, the need for a holistic approach to information management was already expressed and the necessity to hasten the process of cross-disciplinary curriculum development in information management. Although a number of international front-running Schools of Information Science/Studies have since moved away from multidisciplinary towards a more interdisciplinary approach to information management education (Ettinger 1991:29-38; Martin 1991:21-28; Pejova 1996:17), little interdisciplinary curriculum planning, let alone implementation has taken place within the Southern African context.

In both the literature and in practice it is raised as problematic for one faculty or department to independently offer the range of programmes and courses in information science, focusing on information management, to educate information professionals with the necessary breadth and depth to equip them with the required skills and vision to enable them to initiate and develop strategic information policies needed in the private sector, on national and global level. This has resulted in a movement towards inter- and transdisciplinary curricula in a field such as information management which has necessitated the movement toward the formation of Schools incorporating various fields of study not previously envisaged. Therefore, the co-existence of multi-, inter- and transdisciplinary approaches to information management education is regarded as feasible and is proposed within a broader "school" of (library and) information science/studies at tertiary level in South Africa (Fairer-Wessels 1997:99). Cronin (1992:201) states that the next decade will witness a growing interdependency among library and information schools and the formation of new coalitions with schools in the United States providing capstone courses in information studies (Cronin, Stiffler & Day 1993:273).

At a few South African universities interdisciplinary Schools consisting of disciplines complementing one another have recently been formed or are in their embryonic stages of

formation. Disciplines such as Information Science, Computer Science/Informatica, Communication, are usually pooled together to form a School. This interdisciplinary approach of a School allows flexibility for students to move around within the various related disciplines and nurture the acquisition of a wider perspective of their fields of interest.

The co-existence of various perspectives of curricula in information management can also be argued, as manifested in the empirical work, as follows: that on undergraduate level the focus may be interdisciplinary, where students are made information literate to enable them to manage their personal information. As these students move to postgraduate level they have the option to specialise, where the focus then becomes multidisciplinary. This whole process, however, can be offered in reverse, obviously depending on the flexibility of the system, where the undergraduate can start out by specialising in certain areas (ie acquiring skills such as classification, abstracting), and then on postgraduate level follow a holistic or interdisciplinary route.

In 1993, Peter Drucker stated that it appeared that the world economy is shifting from a command model to a knowledge model, and that education should determine who gets each job. Drucker also emphasised the importance of information literacy and that if one focussed too much on technology one would lose track of the fundamental nature of information in today's organisations (Harris 1993:115-122). Today it is imperative to focus on information literacy or personal information management as one of the fundamental educational issues. To be information illiterate in the information age is equal to being blind in a visual world. Due to information imbalances on all levels of teaching in the South African educational system prior to the democratic elections of 1994, one is confronted with university students who are by no means information literate. In essence, information literacy implies that one not only realises the value of information for basic survival and decision making (ie what bus/train to catch to be in time for one's work), but that one is able to "work" with information, that is, to plan and select relevant information, to organise and repackage information for a certain purpose (ie such as to write a report or assignment), and to evaluate the information (ie to question its relevancy and whether the information was relevant for a given task/particular purpose) (Galtung:1998:220). Information literacy or personal information management is the ability to manipulate information to reach a predetermined aim, to make a decision or solve a problem, in other words, to enhance one's situation.

Within a university context such as that of the University of South Africa, where more than 60% of the student body is not sufficiently information literate to function effectively in an academic environment to enable them to perform successfully, a fundamental course or module in basic information literacy and for that matter, computer literacy is essential. Such a course or module should be compulsory for all students across the board, giving it not only interdisciplinary but also transdisciplinary impact. A transdisciplinary core curriculum in information literacy and management, should be developed, cutting across disciplines, with each discipline adding its own speciality with regard to subject content.

Findings derived from in-depth interviews conducted with a group of top managers in the market to determine the needs of the marketplace with regard to the movement towards an integrated interdisciplinary approach, indicated that the majority of respondents listed the importance of an aspirant information manager as to be able to "see the relationships between things and arrive at a synthesis of strategic value". The general consensus is that a student in "Information Science" is more able to see relationships and is therefore a "generalist" with a wider knowledge base, rather than and in contrast to students from some of the other disciplines, such as Computer Science for example, where students are educated to become specialists in certain areas. The importance of a so-called "helicopter view" is also emphasised by respondents - where students are taught to see the larger picture, how issues interconnect and how to match diverse issues.

In conclusion it can be stated that the information age has led to a complex social and institutional structure in modern society. For global citizens to operate successfully within this

society they need to be aware of information as well as accessing and managing it for the purposes of basic survival, let alone decision making and problem solving. Clearly certain information skills are required. The horizontal integration of information management education into information skills curricula at primary and secondary levels and an inter- and/or transdisciplinary approach at tertiary level appears to be the most appropriate means of providing the essential lifelong information literacy and management skills which modern individuals require to function effectively in society as lifelong learners in an increasingly complex global Infosphere (Vlahos 1998:498).

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